



REPORT

Breaking the Barriers: A round table discussion on the legal aspects of volunteering

On 3rd May 2011, Eurodiaconia together with the Diakonisches Werk der EKD held a round table discussion on some of the legal aspects of volunteering. This event was one of Eurodiaconia's and DW's activities on the occasion of the European Year of Volunteering 2011. Irish MEP Mr Sean Kelly and representative of DG Education and Culture, **Mr Frode Dal Fjeldavli** from the European Commission joined Eurodiaconia's members around the table. Mr Pavel Trantina from the European Economic and Social Committee, responsible for chairing the Coordinating Group of the EESC on the EYV2011 was moderator for the discussion. Apart from the panel speakers, an audience of around 25 people was able to join in the discussions.

Heather Roy, Secretary General of Eurodiaconia opened the meeting by welcoming participants to the event and Katharina Wegner from the DW's EU office echoed the welcome and introduced the panellists. Mr Trantina invited the first speakers to present their work. The meeting started with three representatives from members of Eurodiaconia who gave presentations on their work and highlighted the legal framework for volunteering in their countries.

Member presentations

- The first speaker was Ms Martina Geßner who presented the project: "**Youth without Debts**", from **Diakonisches Werk Offenbach-Dreieich-Rodgau, Germany**. Ms Geßner explained that the project involved senior volunteers who have some financial experience in their former professions who want to give something back to society through volunteering. They do this by educating youths about the risk of debt and teaching them how to control the use of their money in order to prevent indebtedness. She also spoke about the legal framework for volunteering in Germany at national, federal and district level. On national level she pointed out that there is tax reduction on voluntary activity, however there is no financial support for volunteer structures, only pilot projects. On federal level, she explained that volunteers have accident and liability insurance and agencies for voluntary work, and on district level, there is a communal agency for voluntary work, but little financial support. On a positive note, Ms Geßner emphasized the support of the public authorities on all levels, especially regional and local, e.g. through training and education measures, even though she asked for more funding. Ms Geßner suggested that there should be more EU funding available for older volunteers (such as the youth programmes have). Presentation [found here on our website](#)
- The second presentation was from the **Christian Foundation Diakonia in Romania**. Ms Hajnalka Lazar, coordinator of international volunteers gave an overview of their social services where volunteers are engaged, such as working with disadvantaged children, nursing homes, and palliative home care. She explained that that have both local and international volunteers and they have occasional and permanent volunteers. This week is in fact the national week of volunteering in Romania. They have been hosting and sending volunteers under the EVS programme (European Voluntary Service) since 2007. Some volunteers enjoy it so much they would like to stay longer than a year but they have problems to fund the volunteers. Regarding the legal framework for volunteering, Ms Lazar pointed out several problems. Although there has been a law on volunteering



in Romania, it is too vague and there is still no volunteer status. Furthermore, there is no budget for voluntary service and therefore no financial support from the state, there is a need for the state to recognise the value of volunteering, which she explained, is currently not acknowledged and there is very little information about volunteering. If she could have one request, it would be funding for volunteer coordinators; she stressed that volunteer management needs financial support. On a positive note, discussions on volunteering with the government are taking place including what the role of the state should be financially to support volunteering and how to improve CRS. Presentation [found here on our website](#)

- From the Netherlands Mr Daan Verbaan from **Kerk in Actie presented the “Togetthere” programme** which is the International Youth programme of ICCO and Kerk in Actie. As well as engaging international volunteers globally, they engage local volunteers who want to do a Social Diaconal Year program in the Netherlands. To do so they cooperate with 20-50 social and diaconal institutions. Regarding the legal framework in the Netherlands, Mr Verbaan explained that one major issue is that there is no clear status for volunteers. For years it has been difficult or impossible to obtain visa for Hungarian volunteers and now they have the same difficulties with volunteers from neighbouring countries like Ukraine and other countries outside the EU. The European Youth Pass and Youth in Action programme are good but the political will was still needed in the Netherlands. He also said it was a challenge to engage young people in volunteering. On the positive side there are collective insurance packages for volunteers within organisations. Presentation [found here on our website](#)

Reactions from the panel

Mr Frode Dal Fjeldavli, from DG Education and Culture, from the European Commission working on the EVS under the Youth in Action programme thanked the speakers for their presentations. He encouraged the members who had presented their work to go on trying to do international volunteering with people from outside the EU even if it seems impossible. He stressed that we should simply not give up in challenging the situation. He also welcomed the intergenerational approach to volunteering shown by the projects. He also noted that there was no central co-ordination of the volunteering agenda across the Commission which meant that there were difference focal points. In the 2011 year it was hoped that there could be more co-ordination.

Member of European Parliament Mr Seán Kelly explained that he was grateful for the invitation even though he was only stepping in for fellow MEP Marian Harkin. He spoke of his own personal engagement in voluntary work and stressed the great value and importance of volunteering, particularly during this time of economic crisis where some needs in communities would not be met if it were not for volunteers. He highlighted that even through this tends to be a subject that the Member States have competency in, the EU can be useful for sharing of best practice as well as ensuring conditions that allow volunteering to flourish.

The discussion was then opened up to the audience. A question was asked to the Commission regarding the state of play or follow up of the 2004 Directive (2004/114/EC) on the conditions of admission of third-country nationals for the purposes of studies, pupil exchange, unremunerated training or voluntary service. Mr Frode Dal Fjeldavli responded that there was a need to ensure adequate follow up and that member states needed to ensure that such directives were applied in their own countries

Conclusions

Catherine Storry from Eurodiaconia gave the closing remarks and thanked her speakers and audience for their participation. She stressed that volunteers make a huge difference to our member organisations as social service providers and that Eurodiaconia wants to acknowledge this contribution today and indeed during the EYV 2011 in particular. She explained that Eurodiaconia's focus this year is on the contribution volunteering makes to promoting social cohesion and that the projects spoken about today reflected this brilliantly. She stressed however that the contribution made through volunteering is not always made visible.



Many powerful stories are of how volunteers have changed lives are not necessarily measurable with numbers and figures which are why events like this are so important. Without volunteering, she highlighted, Europe would not be what it is today. Volunteering is at the heart of European the value of solidarity as it gives people opportunities to 'love one's neighbour' and is crucial for socially cohesive societies in times of increasingly diverse societies.

She highlighted **recommendations for the EU**, such as the exchange of best practice at EU level such as through the social OMC. Regarding the **Commission's Communication** on volunteering to be written this summer, the need for Member States to remove legal barriers to volunteering must be made clear. She stressed that Eurodiaconia would like to see that all people, regardless of legal status are able to volunteer such as asylum seekers. She explained that during their time waiting for an answer, migrants can already be integrating into society, learning valuable skills and contributing to society through voluntary activity. She stressed that Eurodiaconia would like to see something more binding on volunteering from the EC and specifically we would like to see a **white paper on volunteering and active citizenship** as this would commit the EU to take action on volunteering. Furthermore, since volunteering is a cross cutting issue, we know it appears in DG Education and Culture, Humanitarian Aid, Environment, employment and social affairs a white paper would also help to mainstream volunteering in EU policy.

Catherine also requested that the recommendations made in this document that the EYV2011 Alliance is working on 'a European policy agenda on volunteering' are implemented by policy makers at all levels, EU, national and local.

Follow up

Eurodiaconia, with the help of the EYV2011 Alliance will disseminate this report and the presentations to the Legal Framework working group of the Alliance, as well as to the EESC coordinating group of the European Year 2011 but also more generally through the Alliance's EYV 2011 Flow newsletter (www.eyv2011.eu). The report will also be sent to the various MEPs who are in the volunteering interest group in the European Parliament.